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The birth of a capital? Bagendon 'oppidum' and the impact of Rome on the southern Cotswolds

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Introduction

To what extent did the expansion of Rome influence Iron Age societies before, and immediately after, the conquest? The appearance of a group of massive monuments, known as 'oppida', has often been regarded as fundamental to this question. These sites have been regarded as the elite centres of larger social groups which quickly became the capitals or administrative centres of the new Roman province. However, our understanding of how such complexes emerged and what impact they had at a regional level remains relatively limited. Through fieldwork and research on one such 'oppidum', at Bagendon, Gloucestershire (Fig. 1) this project is examining these issues and, by extension, understanding Rome's role in shaping the social, political and economic landscape at the turn of the first millennium.

Background

The complex at Bagendon is represented by a sprawling set of linear earthworks encompassing an area of around 200ha; like many territorial oppida, these do not apparently define a distinct, enclosed area. Earlier excavations (Clifford 1961) revealed evidence of coin minting and industrial activity, suggesting it was the social and political centre of the Dobunni. Unlike many 'oppida' the Roman town (Corinium: modern Cirencester) was not built on the site of Late Iron Age activity, but located 3km to the south. The means that Bagendon represents a rare opportunity to examine the Iron Age and earliest Roman phases to such a complex, without the impact of Roman and Medieval occupation.

In order to understand how the site developed and the impact of Rome on this process, this project is reassessing the nature of the complex. This includes a major geophysical survey of the Bagendon area (c. 150ha surveyed so far, using high-resolution magnetometry); small-scale excavation of newly identified elements; analysis of unpublished excavations from the 1980s; and reassessment and survey of sites in the environs of the oppidum. Combined, this project is providing a clearer understanding of the oppidum's place in Late Iron Age to Roman transition and how the less stratified communities of the Middle Iron Age morphed in to the centralised civitas of the Roman province.

Preliminary results

Results so far have indicated a more complex development of the Bagendon complex than was previously imagined. Survey and excavations has indicated that the complex probably began as a group of small banjo-like enclosure in the Middle Iron Age (Fig 2:a, b), similar in form to banjo-complexes such as Gussage Cow Down, Dorset (see Moore 2012). The presence of similar arrangements known from aerial photography nearer-by at Northleach, Gloucestershire, may also suggest that, in its earliest phases, the enclosures at Bagendon were not unique. These enclosures

probably had a communal agricultural role, situated as they are on the interface between the very different agricultural and settlement landscapes of the Upper Thames Valley and the Cotswolds.

Bagendon's heyday appears to have been in the mid-1st century AD. The geophysics has now revealed an area of intensive occupation consisting of pits and gullies (Fig. 2:c), similar to that examined in the 1950s and 1980s. This can now be shown to cover an area of around 16ha. There is some indication, from the regularity of trackways and ditches dividing up the valley floor that this may have been a relatively well-planned layout, perhaps similar to that recognised at another oppidum: Silchester (Fulford and Timby 2000). Recent reassessment of material from the areas excavated suggests most of this occupation dates to around AD40-60, although activity may have started as early as c. AD20. Material from the excavated areas, including a rare pudding stone quern from Hertfordshire and coins of Tasciovanus of the Catuvellauni, indicate the complex probably had close relations with its counterpart at Verulamium. Such evidence might even corroborate Cassius Dio's (Hist. Rom. LX, 20) claim that part of the Dobunni were subject to the Catuvellauni.

It is also clear that the earthworks and activity at Bagendon represent just one element of a much larger complex that encompassed sites of Late Iron Age date spread over a wide area (Fig. 1: a). To the north, at 'Ditches' a large enclosure clearly contained high status occupation from the 1st century BC onwards, culminating in the construction of an exceptionally early Roman villa in the AD70-80s (Fig 1: b; Trow et al 2009). To the west, two enclosures partially investigated in the 1990s also revealed Gallo-Belgic imported pottery, contemporary with Bagendon; the large enclosure at Duntisbourne Grove probably representing another high status enclosure (Fig 1: c, d). The arrangement at Bagendon suggests similarities with other 'polyfocal' oppida complexes like Verulamium and Camulodunum, with dispersed high status enclosures discreet from artisanal areas (Moore 2012).

The regional impact

Largely due to the impact of developer funded archaeology in the region, the results from Bagendon can now be integrated in to a better understanding of the nature of regional settlement change from the Middle Iron Age to early Roman period. This is indicating that many of the settlements to the south of Bagendon, in the Upper Thames Valley, saw dramatic changes in the early 1st century AD, with for example reorganisation of settlements at Thornhill and Claydon Pike, near Lechlade and Ashton Keynes. It is too early to make a direct correlation between such transformations and the emergence of the complex, but it seems likely that as the resources and scale of activity at Bagendon (and its wider complex) developed it had an impact on the surrounding region; presumably in the form of tribute to the nascent elites and as a centre of exchange.

The Roman conquest does not appear to have had a negative impact on the development of the complex, instead the immediate post-conquest period marked the heyday of the site. Indeed, the construction of the Roman fort at nearby Leholme, probably in the AD50s, might suggest the presumed elite at the Bagendon-complex had the overt support of the Roman authorities, perhaps even as some form of client kingdom. The abandonment of parts of the complex, at Bagendon itself and the enclosures at Duntisbourne, seems to have taken place around AD60, contemporary with the development of the town at Corinium. There seems to have been little impact on the wider landscape however; Ditches continued to be occupied and thrived with the construction of the villa in the late 1st century AD. It seems likely that Corinium replaced Bagendon's role as centre of production and exchange. Whether this move represented merely the choice of a more appropriate site for a Roman town or more of a political statement, related perhaps to the possible Late Iron Age/early Roman burial monuments at Tar Barrows (Fig 1: f; Reece 2003), remains open to question.

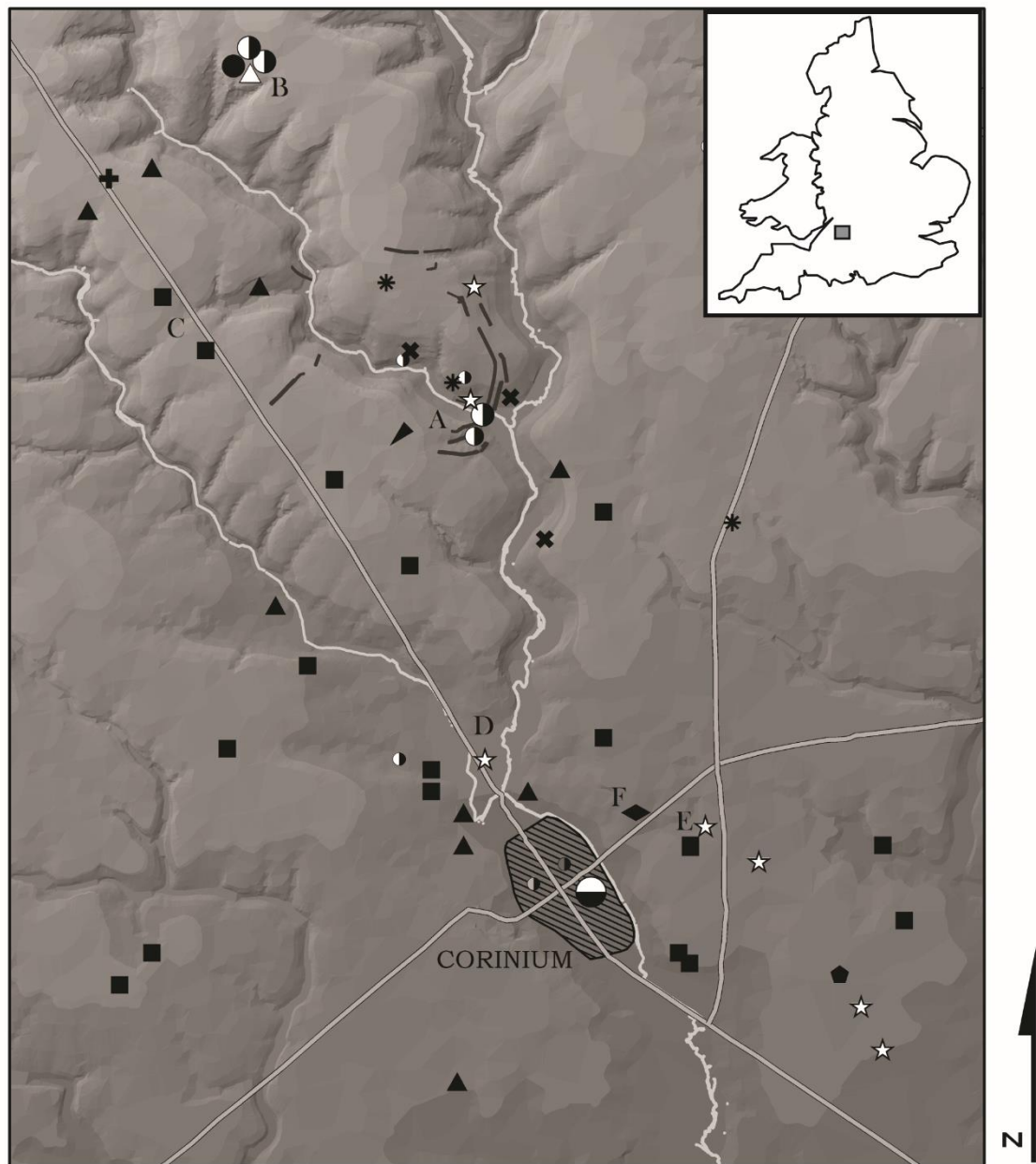
Conclusions

The implications from Bagendon are that many oppida are likely to have had more complex sequences of development than has been recognised. The identification of an earlier phase to the complex may explain why the oppidum was located here. It has been suggested that many Late Iron Age oppida appeared in newly exploited or social significant but under-utilised areas of the existing landscape (e.g. Moore 2007; Hill 2007). Evidence from Bagendon now indicates that areas of the landscape in to which some Late Iron Age oppida emerged may have been used differently from the rest of the Middle Iron Age landscape, but were certainly not empty. Evidence of potentially similar sites in the region may suggest that at the end of the 1st millennium BC, Bagendon was one amongst a number of complexes on the Cotswold/Thames valley interface but in the early-mid 1st century AD it became predominant with an explosion of activity as a new elite dominated and transformed the complex, perhaps through power based on links to Verulamium and, indirectly, to Rome. Questions remain over how this process took place and whether all of the complex followed this chronological development. To answer such questions, excavation of other elements to the complex is planned whilst geophysical survey of potential Late Iron Age and early Roman sites in the environs of Bagendon will provide better understanding of the context and impact of the site on the wider landscape.

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Figures:



Bagendon

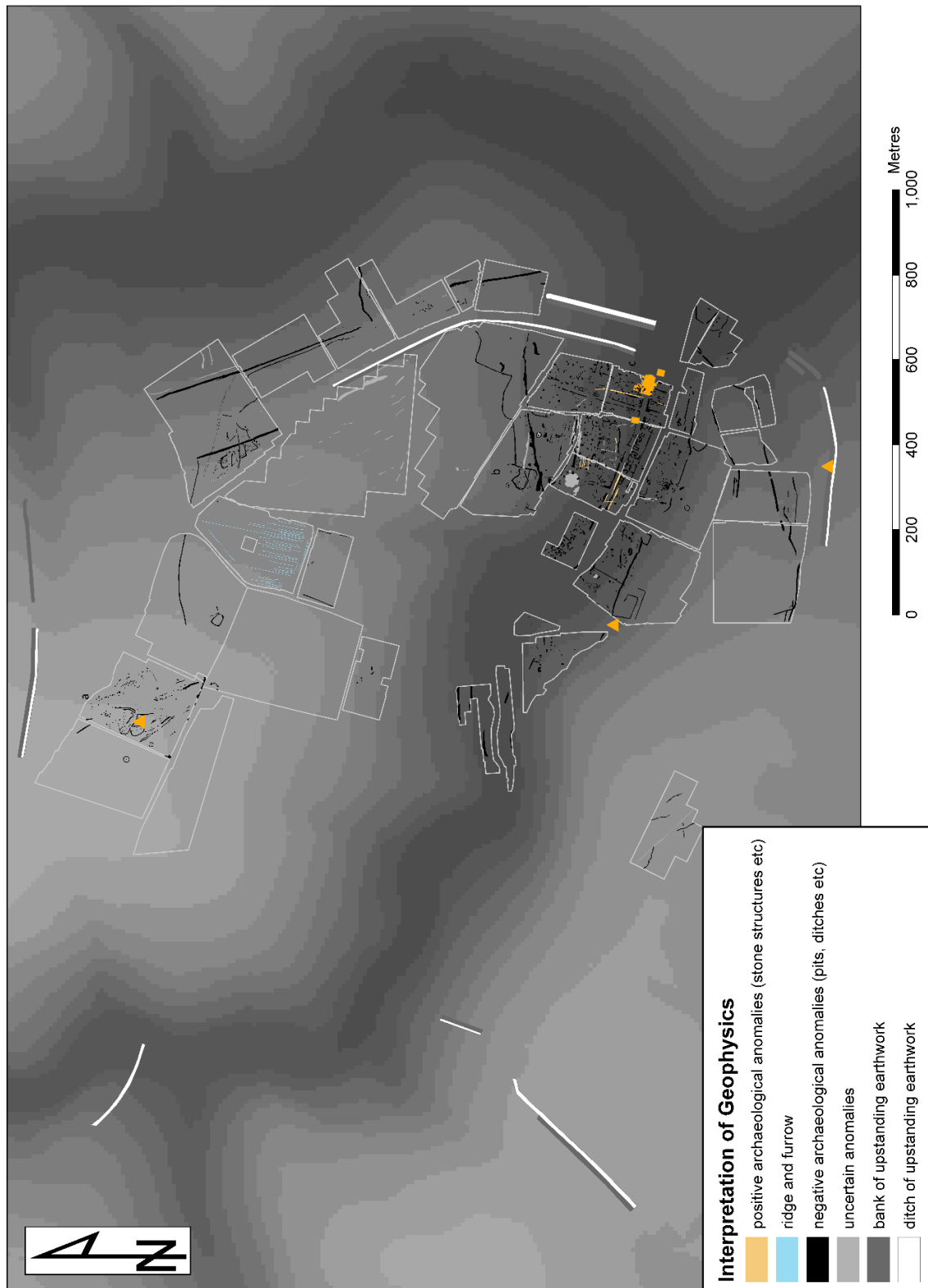
- Roman Road
- Rivers
- Bagendon Earthworks
- LIA Coin - Corieltavi
- LIA Coin - Durotrigian
- LIA Coin - Dobunni
- LIA Coin - Dobunni (>2)
- LIA Coin - Dobunni (>5)

- LIA Coin - Dobunni (>50)
- ▲ LIA Metalwork
- * Banjo Enclosure
- ☆ Iron Age Activity
- ✕ LIA Burial
- ◆ LIA Barrow
- ✚ RB Burial

- △ ER Villa
- ▲ RB Settlement
- ▼ RB Temple
- ⬠ Polygonal Enclosure
- Rectilinear Enclosure
- Unenclosed Settlement
- Large Enclosure

0 1 2 3 Km

1. Location of Bagendon and elements of the wider complex (A: Bagendon; B: Ditches; C: Duntisbourne Grove and Middle Duntisbourne; D: Stratton; E: Kingshill; F: Tar Barrows)



2. Interpretation of geophysical survey of the Bagendon area in relation to earlier and current excavations (a/b: Scrubditch and Cutham 'banjo-like' enclosures; c: occupation area in the valley; yellow triangles and blocks: excavated areas, 1954-2013)